Newsletter for Birdwatchers

Vol. 44 No. 1
Jan. – Feb. 2004

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CONTENTS

- **A note from the Publisher**
  - Reviving a Rich Tradition
  - Error Free Electronic Format
- **Articles**
  - Trip report: Thattekad – Munnar (Kerala), by Govind Kumar
  - More on Vedanthangal, by V. Santharam
  - From Thomas Waterfield's Nature Diaries, by Zafar Futehally
  - The Death of a Nightjar, by Aasheesh Pittie
  - Boobies in India, by Jaidev Dhadhal, Dr. Pravinsang Dodiya, Miss. Ruchi Dave and Members of Flamingo Nature Club, Mahuva
- **Reviews**
  - Birds of Western Ghats, Kokan and Malabar, by Satish Pande, *et al.*
  - Biology of Indian Barbets, by H.S.A. Yahya
- **Correspondence**
  - A Paradise for White-bellied Sea Eagle: Netrani Island, by N.A. Madhyastha
  - Crested Hawk Eagle *(Spizaetus cirrhatus)* foraging on Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus)*, by Raju Kasambe
  - Mass mortality of Asian Openbill Stork *(Anastomus oscitans)* in Kulik Bird Sanctuary, Malda District, West Bengal, by S.J. Ghosh
  - Red-necked Grebe *(Podiceps griseigena)* in West Bengal, a correction, by Arunayan Sharma
  - A brief account of participation in VII Neotropical Ornithological Congress, by H.S.A. Yahya
  - Black headed Bunting (*Emberiza melanocephala)* at Daroji, Karnataka, by Pramod Subbarao
  - Comments on cover photo, by Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh

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A note from the Publisher

Dear Fellow Birdwatchers,

At the outset, let me wish you all a very happy and prosperous new year. The *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* has completed 43 splendid years and continues to be immensely popular among the birdwatchers of India and abroad. I have great pleasure in mailing to you this first issue of the 44th volume. Concomitantly, sixteen years have gone by since I took over the responsibility of publishing the Newsletter way back in 1988. This achievement could not have been possible but for the conscientious co-operation of our Founder Editor Zafar Futehally, who has just laid down the office at the prime age of 85, due to cataract and hearing problems. In these intervening years, Dr Joseph George and Fl.Lt. S. Rangaswami (Retd), have always been at hand to systematically scrutinize the articles for errors and inaccuracies, and forward them to me in a refined manner. My staff at the Newsletter office have been supporting me all the way, with allegiance beyond compare. Their tasks include perpetual revision of address lists, maintenance of accounts, and preparation of drafts from manuscripts, printing, sorting and mailing the copies to all the readers on schedule. The munificent support extended by readers like you through subscriptions, stimulating articles, candid bird notes, and vivid species updates, has sustained the Newsletter all these years. I take this opportunity to thank you all, and express my deep sense of gratitude for your absolute support and encouragement that has propelled me to publish some 93 issues of the Newsletter with impeccable consistency.

Reviving a Rich Tradition

The Newsletter has had a rich tradition of having an Editorial Board during the sixties and seventies. The Board was represented by ace ornithologists and avid birdwatchers alike. Dr. Salim Ali, Mrs. Jamal Ara, Mrs. Usha Ganguli, Dr. Joseph George, Dr. B.R. Grub, Mr. Kunvarshri Lavkumar, Dr. R.M. Naik, Prof. K.K. Neelakantan, Mr. K.R.Sethna, Mr. Y.S. Shivarajkumar, and many others were on the Board to give the fundamental thrust to the Newsletter during its formative years. The tradition of having an editorial board was given up, when the Founder Editor moved over to Bangalore. In order to facilitate the Newsletter to soar to greater heights, enlarge its reach and effectively awaken the popular enthusiasm for birdwatching, we have now revived the tradition of having an Editorial Board. You will notice that the Board is represented by dedicated birdwatchers, who have had an illustrious past and are enjoying a luminous present, in their chosen fields. Whilst some have contributed immensely to

the bird conservation movement, others have set legendary examples of ecological wisdom. You will agree that with their august presence, the Newsletter will have a glorious future as well. The Editorial Board will identify naïve and enthusiastic birders from across the country and encourage them to join our fraternity and to contribute befitting articles and notes on ornithology and birdwatching.

We are in the throes of enlarging our Editorial Board and the processes of consultation and consolidation have been initiated. We invite nominations to the Board from unrepresented areas.

Error Free Electronic Format

We had invited Dr. V. Santharam and Mr. Aasheesh Pitte to 'Guest Edit' the present issue. We are happy to inform you that they have done an excellent job of screening the articles and returning them to us in an error free electronic format. We offer our special thanks to them for their services.

Thanking you once again,

Yours in bird conservation,

S. Sridhar
Publisher, NLBW

Trip Report: Thattekad-Munnar (Kerala)

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This is an account of a four-day birding holiday with family to Thattekad and Munnar in Kerala in July 2003. Despite the fact that it was the monsoon season, we ended the trip with a satisfying list of 136 birds and 9 mammals.

At Thattekad we stayed at the Palamattam Farmhouse, about 3 kms from the ferry landing. There are far cheaper options available such as the Hornbill Rest House run by the Kerala Forest Department at Thattekad and rooms in the Edamalayar Power Plant area run by the Public Works Department (PWD). These are located in good birding areas and allow maximum time for birding, obviating time lost in travel back and forth to base for food. At Munnar, we stayed at the Forest Department Inspection Bungalow thanks to the Wildlife Warden, James Zachariah. Local travel was by a Tata Sumo, hired at Thattekad .Our guide was K.V. Eldhose, a simple and unassuming man with a growing international reputation as a bird guide for tourists. His phenomenal knowledge of local bird calls and habitats coupled with fantastic bird-spotting skills provided us with many excellent sightings and a decent trip list.

16.vii.2003: We travelled by train from Chennai, disembarking at Alwaye (Aluva), and hired a car at the Railway Station to take us to Thattekad (43 kms). Reaching the Palamattam Farmhouse at 9.30 a.m., we freshened up and had a quick breakfast while waiting for Eldhose to arrive with our vehicle and driver. It was a cloudy day with occasional drizzle. The better part of the day (11.00 a.m.-5.00 p.m.) was spent exploring the Edamalayar Power Plant area outside the Thattekad Bird Reserve. As we drove along, passing a checkpoint on the way, teak *Tectona grandis* plantations and moist deciduous tracts gave way to impressive semi-evergreen forest with tall trees.

A small party of Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* was seen in a forest clearing. A mixed feeding flock of birds in tall moist deciduous forest produced a superb male Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker *Picus chlorolophus*, a pair of Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*, Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*, Bronzed *Dicrurus aeneus* and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos *Dicrurus paradiseus*, Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*, Large Woodshrike *Tephrodornis gularis*, Quaker Tit-Babbler *Alcippe poioicephala*, Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica* and Pied Flycatcher-Shrike *Hemipus picatus*. We had close-up views of Oriental Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus orientalis* on a telephone wire seeing a total of five individuals at various points along the road. Also on telephone wires were seven Crested Tree-Swifts *Hemiprocne coronata* and three Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*. We heard calls of Indian Rufous Babbler *Turdoides subrufus* in the undergrowth, but it then started to rain. The showers continued for about 25 minutes. In the crisp and cool atmosphere, we had fantastic close-up eye-level views of nine White-rumped Needletail-Swifts *Zoonavena sylvatica* and 15+ Dusky Crag-Martins *Hirundo concolor* at the Edamalayar Dam. A Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii* was seen carrying food in its beak. It had a nest near a rock face opposite the look-out point near the dam.

A Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus* was seen on a tall bare tree, busily dismembering a bird while a Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela* circled overhead giving shrill calls in flight. We had distant views of a smallish Hawk Eagle with dark under parts, possibly Rufous-bellied *Hieraaetus kienerii*. We also saw a Western Ghats Flying Lizard *Draco dussumieri* (?) gliding from one tree to another.

We then came across another mixed feeding flock of birds which had Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*, Common Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium javanense* (the rarest of the eleven woodpeckers in the area according to Eldhose), Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*, up to ten showy White-bellied Treepies *Dendrocitta leucogastra*, Asian Fairy-Bluebird *Irena puella*, Black-lored Yellow *Parus xanthogenys* and Great Tits *Parus major*, Black-crested *Pycnonotus melanicterus* and Yellow-browed Bulbuls *Iole indica*, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*, Small Sunbird *Nectarinia minima*, Plain Flowerpecker *Dicaeum concolor*, Gold-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*, Southern Hill-Myna *Gracula indica*, Blue-winged Parakeet *Psittacula columboides* and Indian Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus vernalis*. Indian Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii* was heard here. Five Mountain Imperial-Pigeons *Ducula badia* were seen in flight and we had a fine male White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis pallipes*, brief views of Grey-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus priocephalus* and close up views of an immature Malabar Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros griseus* on a telephone wire. Five Indian Edible-nest Swiftlets *Collocalia unicolor* were seen overhead. The stunning Paris Peacock butterfly *Papilio paris* seemed very common here as also the showy Malabar Banded Peacock *Papilio buddha* and the demure Blue Mormon *Papilio polymnestor*.

Returning to Thattekad, we stopped at a roadside teak plantation, with degraded secondary growth, and had excellent views of a pair of Little Scaly-bellied Green Woodpeckers *Picus xanthopygaeus*, Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*, Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, White-headed *Turdoides affinis* and Jungle Babblers *Turdoides striatus*, Purple-rumped Sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica*, Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* and Great Tit.

Eldhose then took us to a day roost site of Mottled Wood-Owl *Strix ocellata*. We had excellent views of four birds. The owls appeared a bit spooked and kept flying from tree to tree before eventually flying off in the direction of the river.

An open area where teak was being planted yielded a female Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea* as it clambered about the teak logs and brushwood, affording good views. This area held a pair of Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus* while Asian Palm-Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis* flew overhead.

Back in the farmhouse *c*6.30 p.m., three Great Eared-Nightjars *Eurostopodus macrotis* were seen catching winged termites (Order: Isoptera) in flapping and gliding flight. Also feeding on the termites were up to four Painted Bats *Kerivoula picta*, a few Fulvous Fruit Bats *Rousettus leschenaulti* and many Greater Racket-tailed Drongos (some without rackets). The Painted Bats sometimes chased the nightjars. A Brown Hawk-Owl *Ninox scutulata* was also seen briefly as it flew out of a tree to capture a termite. A Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum* was heard in the garden.

17.vii.2003: Generally cloudy and rain free day with only a couple of light showers. Bird activity rather poor overall but lots of leeches (Hirudinidae) whenever one stepped off the road. We proceeded to the Thattekad ferry at 6.45 a.m., after a hearty breakfast. An adult Changeable Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus* was on a bare tree near the Mottled Wood Owl day roost site (7.00 a.m.). Eldhose showed us mud nests of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* under an unfinished portion of the new bridge, under construction, to the right of the ferry ticket office. The bridge is scheduled to be completed later this year whereupon the historic ferry operations will cease forever. While waiting to board the ferry, we had two Lesser Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis*, six Ashy Woodswallows *Artamus fuscus*, two Red-rumped Swallows and a Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*. We crossed the Periyar River by ferry and purchased entrance tickets for the reserve . The forest guard advised us not to walk beyond a kilometer into the reserve as a rogue tusker that had attacked birders a year ago was active and elephant (Indian Elephant *Elephas maximus*) movements in general were very frequent and disturbing. We had an Oriental Broad-billed Roller, three Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters *Merops leschenaulti* and Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* just before the electrified gate. We changed plans, postponing the sanctuary visit to the afternoon and instead visiting Orulathanny, a prime birding site some 12 kms away at the far end of the island.

This proved, in hindsight, to be a good decision as the birding, though slow, was quite superb. The trees here were lofty and impressive and we enjoyed good views of many vocal Green Imperial-Pigeons *Ducula aenea* high up in the canopy, resultant sore necks notwithstanding! We had brief views of a calling female White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher at close range while a Grey-headed Bulbul was seen fluttering to take insects from a sprig, often perching on open branches in between bouts of feeding, and uttering its harsh *peenk peenk* calls.

We then had an exquisite male Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus*, just off the road, that gave great frontal views at ten feet. We were delighted, since trogons have a knack of turning their backs on you. Good views of Malabar Giant Squirrel *Ratufa indica* and a party of four Malabar Grey Hornbills followed and Eldhose showed us a female Giant Wood Spider *Nephila maculata* on its web. We had to look long and hard before we could locate the tiny male. He then followed up distant calls of Great Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis* and lead us to a tree about 50 m off the road where three magnificent male birds were seen spiraling about the tree trunk while giving their loud klaxon-like *kaink kaaink* calls. It was a mad dash through fairly thick undergrowth, dripping wet with overnight rain, but we emerged unscathed except for a single leech on my right ankle, which I was able to flick off without much ado. This was a target bird for me and quite an unforgettable sight with its vivid red crest and large size. Back on the road three Black-headed Babblers *Rhopocichla atriceps* were located in the undergrowth by their scolding notes. Other birds seen here included Black-crested Bulbul, Southern Hill-Myna, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostris*, Pied Flycatcher-Shrike, Scarlet Minivet, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Gold-fronted Chloropsis, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Heart-Spotted Woodpecker, White-bellied Treepie *Dendrocitta leucogastra* and Crimson-throated Barbet *Megalaima rubricapillus*. Orulathanny is also a good site for Wynaad Laughingthrush but we could not find any. Eldhose observed that this species tended to associate with Scimitar Babblers in feeding flocks and that he had located the Laughingthrush by following up calls of Scimitar Babbler on many occasions. We used the ferry to cross back to the mainland and Eldhose took us to a spot along the river Periyar supposedly good for Greater Grey-headed Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* but we missed seeing it. However, we had a pair of Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker, a Oriental Broad-billed Roller, three Little Cormorants *Phalacrocorax niger* and a pair of Large Pied Wagtails *Motacilla maderaspatensis* apart from a vocal Stork-billed Kingfisher *Halcyon capensis* on the far side.

We birded a teak plantation on the way, seeing Jungle Owlet, Shikra *Accipiter badius* and a party of Large Woodshrikes. In an area of reeds adjoining a *guava Psidium guajava* orchard we had a calling Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata* and partook of the succulent *guava* fruit while Blue-winged Parakeets flew overhead. We returned to Palamattam Farmhouse for a short lunch break and then drove back to the ferry point, birding along the way. We had superb views of a circling Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* showing heavy streaking on the chest, barred under parts and broad dark tail banding. We then had prolonged views of a pair of Rufous Woodpeckers *Celeus brachyurus* in a 'slash and burn' area of open teak forest. The birds were very confiding and often gave their tri-syllabic *ki ki ki* call. A calling Franklin's Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii*, a large perched group of 40 Crested Tree-Swifts, two Black-throated Munias *Lonchura kelaarti*, Ashy Woodswallow, and Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus* were also seen.

Upon getting back to the island, we used our entrance tickets of the morning's aborted visit to re-enter the reserve. Eldhose

obtained permission for us to drive up to a watchtower some 2km inside the reserve. The plan was that we would sit up in the watchtower while Eldhose searched for roosting Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*, our target bird. Despite searching for almost three hours and covering more than 10 known sites, he had no luck and was quite distraught. For our part, we had an absolutely dismal time in the watchtower—no bird activity and a thundershower that lasted 30 minutes. Things brightened up a bit after that and we had four Yellow-browed Bulbuls, a Grey-headed Bulbul, a White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, two Little Cormorants, several Bronzed Drongos, Scarlet Minivets, Small Sunbirds *Nectarinia minima* and Red-whiskered Bulbuls *Pycnonotus jocosus* from the watchtower apart from a small troop of Bonnet Macaque *Macaca radiata* and two Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* at the waters edge.

Returning to the mainland, we drove to Bhoothathankettu, a stakeout for Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*. We did not see the owl but we had a Brown-backed Needletail-Swift *Hirundapus giganteus*, six Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, seven Darters *Anhinga melanogaster* and seven Asian Openbill-Stork *Anastomus oscitans* on a tree, and a Stork-billed Kingfisher. In an inundated paddy field en route, we had four Lesser Whistling Duck and two Bronze-winged Jacanas *Metopidius indicus*. A male Little Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker *Picus xanthopygaeus* was seen in a teak plantation. We found three Malabar Grey Hornbills feeding on fruit in the centre of the narrow winding road just outside the Palamattam Farmhouse gate. We also had a Ruddy Mongoose *Herpestes smithii* in the garden, late in the evening.

18.vii.2003: 7.00 a.m. The day started with a male Black-naped Monarch-Flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea* appearing in the farmhouse garden along with several noisy Greater Racket-tailed Drongos and Black-headed Orioles. As we were driving out of the gates, a Pompadour Green-Pigeon *Treron pompadora* basking in a tall bare tree gave good views. We also had an immature Changeable Hawk-Eagle perched on a tree stump in a forest clearing.

Driving towards Munnar (70 kms) we had fine views of a perched Crested Goshawk sunning itself, spreading its banded tail and showing chestnut barring on the breast. We stopped at an orchard en route where there was excellent bird activity. Indian Hanging-Parrot, Little Spiderhunter, Bronzed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Black-headed Oriole, Blue-winged Parakeet, Malabar Grey Hornbill, White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, Indian Treepie, Common Iora, Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*, Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* and Gold-fronted Chloropsis were all seen well. Indian Hanging-Parrots were seen clinging to Banana (*Musa* sp.) stands and *chikkoo Achras sapota* trees busily eating the fruit.

At Adimalai, we had a perched Crested Serpent-Eagle and close-up view of Malabar Whistling-Thrush with the bright cobalt blue in the wings and forehead obvious in excellent light. In a stream near Munnar, we had a Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* and three Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis*. We counted up to 12 Rufous-backed Shrikes *Lanius schach* including an immature bird on telephone wires in and around Munnar. Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata* and Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* were also ubiquitous. After securing accommodation at the Inspection Bungalow in Munnar, we headed for Rajamalai (Eravikulam National Park). As we crossed the first check-post, the heavens opened up and it rained steadily for over fifteen minutes, forcing us to remain within the vehicle until it slowed to a drizzle. Here we had stunning views of a group of very tame Nilgiri Tahr *Hemitragus hylocrius* by the roadside at five feet. The group had a 'saddleback' billy-goat and a kid and comprised ten animals. Two more groups were seen further ahead numbering six and four animals respectively.

Immediately thereafter we saw two Nilgiri Pipits *Anthus nilghiriensis* on a flat rocky area covered by short tussocks of grass. Again the birds were amazingly tame, allowing a close approach to within five feet and then walking away slowly with deliberate movements. The birds showed heavy streaking on the back and flanks and had rich buff under parts. The illustration in the Kazmierczak (2000) is totally inaccurate. It depicts a bird with very light streaking on the back and much duller under parts than is visible in the field. The picture in Grimmett (1999), however, is spot-on. We watched the pipits for over ten minutes and then decided to return, as we could not take the vehicle any further.

We came across a pair of confiding White-bellied Shortwings *Brachypteryx major*, of the *albiventris* race, in scrubby undergrowth by the side of the winding mountain road, between the first and second check-posts. One bird had an insect in its bill. It remained perched on a small boulder and seemed totally at ease even though we stood barely four feet away. Both birds showed the characteristic short white eyebrow, the orange-red iris, indigo blue breast and upper parts and white lower belly. Another singing bird was located in a shola behind the first check-post. It sang sweetly and responded to my mimicking of its whistled notes and approached to within six feet.

At the first check-post, we had superb views of a Besra Sparrowhawk *Accipiter virgatus* perched prominently on a bare tree. Good views of the prominently dark banded tail, heavily barred breast and under parts and prominent mesial stripe were obtained. Here, we also had a solitary Nilgiri Langur *Semnopithecus johnii*. Shortwings were everywhere and at least seven singing birds were noted in the area between the first check-post and the shola near Kannimalai School. This appears to be their breeding season and the best time to see this superb endemic. The little relict shola had a female Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata*, three Grey-headed Flycatchers *Culicicapa ceylonensis* and a party of Oriental White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus*. In the same area, we had a Dusky Striped Squirrel *Funambulus sublineatus* busily eating berries in a short-grown tree.

From here, we took the path up to the Kannimalai Tea Estate and we soon had stellar views of three Nilgiri Pipits in the scrubby hillside bordering the tea garden. The birds crept along, mouse-like, amongst the tea bushes. Every now and then one would perch prominently atop a tea bush, gently wagging its tail. The very prominent supercilium, dark iris, pinkish legs, buff throat, boldly streaked crown, upper belly, back and flanks were seen well. More excitement followed with a fly past by two Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons *Columba elphinstonii* at eye-level. Eldhose then decided we should try for Broad-tailed Grass-Warbler *Schoenicola platyura*. A brisk five-minute walk brought us to an area of tall grass above the tea estate. Eldhose's phenomenal hearing was again in evidence as he picked up the faint calls of the Grass-Warbler. We scanned the grassland intently for movement and

soon a bird emerged to perch for about 15 seconds on a grassy stem. We had fair views of the rich brown upper parts, whitish under parts, buffy flanks and broad rounded tail. My first impression was that of a rather large prinia. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, then shot up a few feet above the grass, dived back into cover and then repeated the routine.

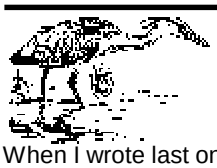
Returning to Munnar, we had a Malabar Whistling-Thrush on the fence of a timer yard and a solitary Grey-breasted Laughingthrush *Garrulax jerdoni* in roadside scrub. Two Malabar Whistling-Thrushes were seen chasing each other over rooftops in the centre of Munnar town.

19.vii.2003: Awoke to the calls of Indian Scimitar-Babbler, Grey-breasted Laughingthrush and Malabar Whistling-Thrush. A solo Whistling-Thrush was hopping about in the driveway of the IB at 7.00 a.m. Visited the relict shola beside Kannimalai school at 8.00 a.m., and soon located a flock of 17 Grey-breasted Laughingthrushes in lantana (*Lantana* sp.) scrub. Their sweet contact calls were a clue to their presence but it took a while for the flock to show itself. The subspecies in this area is '*fairbanki*' with extended and prominent white supercilia. At least two White-bellied Shortwings were singing in the undergrowth in the shola and the *chikkirik* contact calls of Black-and-Orange Flycatcher *Ficedula nigrorufa* were heard from a dank *nullah*. Also the plaintive *seep seep* call of the Dusky Striped Squirrel was heard at four different places.

We left Munnar for Theni in neighbouring Tamil Nadu at 9.00 a.m., stopping at promising spots to bird. On the outskirts of Munnar we had a pair of Malabar Whistling-Thrushes, Pied Bushchat, Little Cormorant, White-breasted Kingfisher, Rufous-backed Shrike and also four House Swallows *Hirundo tahitica* on a telephone wire. We then encountered thick fog and passed road workers clearing the debris from a landslide. Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*, Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*, Black-lored Yellow Tit, Southern Hill-Myna, Blue-winged Parakeet, Quaker Tit-Babbler, Small Sunbird, a pair of Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker and surprisingly, a Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis* were seen in a mixed feeding flock of birds immediately after crossing the Lockhart Gap. Another mixed feeding flock of birds at Poopara at the edge of a cardamom plantation with lofty shade trees produced 21 species including superb views of Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Speckled Piculet *Picumnus innominatus*, a solitary *nigropileus* Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Scarlet Minivet, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and Yellow-browed Bulbul.

The Poopara area proved rewarding with an impressive swarm of 100+ Brown-backed Needletail-Swifts over a tea garden, a female Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Oriental Magpie-Robin. At the Kanniar Tea Estate (Harrison's Malayalam Plantations Ltd.), we had a fantastic flock of 20+ Rufous Babblers. The birds generally skulked under tea bushes but popped out every now and then to perch prominently on shade trees. We also had a Franklin's Prinia on a wire and several Southern Hill-Mynas and Grey-headed Starlings in a flowering tree. We arrived at the Bodi Ghat in the early afternoon and bird activity was poor. However, a few minutes search at the gully *c.*13 km from Bodimettu produced three Yellow-throated Bulbuls *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* and four White-browed Bulbuls *Pycnonotus luteolus*. We also saw Sirkeer Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii*, Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica*, Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, Little Brown Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* and Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata* in the area. Descending the *Ghat*, we had Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix grisea*, Streaked Fantail-Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*, Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca* and Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis* on wires before Bodi Town.

We proceeded to Theni where we bid farewell to Eldhose and Anish and took a bus to the temple town of Madurai en route to our next destination, Kanniyakumari. Thus ended a great birding holiday made ever so interesting by the vagaries of the monsoon, an experience enriched considerably by the remarkable skills of Eldhose.



More on Vedanthangal

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When I wrote last on the subject [*NLBW* 40(5): 57-59], I thought I had updated and gleaned all relevant information on this famous heronry from all published sources. I was sadly mistaken. I had a real surprise when I recently received a photocopy of an article, "Account of a Heronry, and Breeding-place of other Water-birds, in Southern India" by John Shortt, M.D., F.L.S., from my friend Dr R. Kannan based in Arkansas, USA. I believe this may be the earliest scientific account on Vedanthangal in published literature, having been read at the Linnaean Society of Zoology on November 3, 1864 and published in 1865 in *Journal of the Linnaean Society of Zoology* [8(7): 94-100]. T.C. Jerdon, in his *Birds of India* (1864) makes no mention of the existence of this heronry. In his *The Nests and Eggs of Indian Birds* (2nd edition), Allan O. Hume reproduced almost verbatim a part of these notes (Vol. III, pp. 238-239) with some editing (see below). Hume however does not name the author but says the account was "sent to him by an anonymous writer".

Shortt's article gives the location of Vedanthangal ("Vaden Thaugul"), a brief description of the tank (some of which, as quoted in Hume's account, was reproduced in my earlier note, cited above), the nesting season, lists and descriptions of the breeding birds (eight species) based on two visits by the author in January and on 8th of March 1864. On both the visits, he got a wooden raft assembled and had a closer look at the heronry. The article refers to the agreement "from the ancient *Nabob's* government, that no one is to shoot over the tank, which is strictly enforced to the present day", and to the fact that "the natives understand the value of the dung of the birds in enriching their rice-fields; and when the tank becomes dry, the silt deposited in its bed is taken up to the depth of a foot, and spread over the rice-fields; consequently they are careful not to disturb the birds."

A few comments on the article itself may not be out of place here. The author does not appear to be too familiar with birds and there are a couple of instances of misidentification. For instance the "Small Grey and Black Stork, *Leptotilos javanica*?" referred to in the paper and whose Tamil name is mentioned as "Nutha coottee Narai" is obviously the Asian Openbill-Stork *Anastomus oscitans*. Similarly "the Ibis or Curlew, *Ibis falcinellus*"

is the Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus.* These names are corrected in the version in Hume's book (by whom?) to "Shell-Ibis" and "Ibis" respectively. Also the detail about the acreage of the tank has been corrected from "four acres and a half acres" to "about thirty acres". The other species described to be nesting here include the Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea,* Purple heron *Ardea purpurea,* Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax,* Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger,* Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* and Darter *Anhinga melanogaster.* There is no mention about the Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis* in this account (as also in the article on Vedanthangal by Bates in his book *Birdlife in India*, 1931). However, there is a mention of this species nesting in Vedanthangal ("Vaden Tanjal") by Captain H.N. Packard [quoted by Dewar, *JBNHS* XVI(3): 484-498]. [Incidentally there is a note by Packard on Vedanthangal in *JBNHS* XV: 138-139 which I am yet to refer to.]

An interesting record in this note is that of the breeding of the Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*. This species is rarely seen in Vedanthangal these days and there are no recent breeding records here. It is interesting to note that villagers had referred to the occasional breeding of the Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* here. There is no mention of its occurrence in the Sanctuary in the accounts of Bates and others except the sight records (not breeding) of P.J. Sanjeeva Raj in 1956 [*JBNHS* 53(4): 703-704]. As referred to in my earlier notes, we found the bird breeding irregularly since 1984.

It is also of great interest to note that the egret species - Little *Egretta garzetta*, Median *Mesophoyx intermedia*, Large *Casmerodius albus*) and Cattle *Bubulcus ibis*, were only noticed congregating in large numbers to roost, and were not observed nesting, by Shortt in 1865, whereas it was reported by Krishnan (*Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary* [in Tamil]; TN Forest Dept; 1961), and Spillett (*JBNHS* 65: 633-663; 1968), that Little Egrets were among the most numerous nesting birds at Vedanthangal. Cattle Egrets were also reported nesting here by Krishnan. Bates had seen only a small number (not more than a dozen birds) of the Little Egrets nesting though he too referred to the large roosting population. Neelakantan (quoted in the 1971 article in *NLBW*, July 1971: p. 6-9) had included Cattle, Little and Median Egrets in his list of the breeding birds without giving any figures). Current estimates showed that the number of breeding egrets is low [Santharam & Menon, *NLBW* 31(11&12): p.6-8. 1991].

It would be interesting to build a picture of the composition and changes in the populations of breeding birds at Vedanthangal over the years and monitor future changes. Factors leading to these changes—both internal and external—could be analyzed to help effective management of the heronry and its surrounding landscape.

From Thomas Waterfield's Nature Diaries

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The following is the reproduction of portions of the diaries of Thomas Waterfield who joined the Indian Civil Service in 1929. His family had a two centuries old association with India, beginning with his great-grandfather who had served the East India Company. His own father and grandfather were, like himself, members of the ICS.

Tom had many skills and hobbies. He was a sportsman, a writer, poet, musician, and a naturalist. The life of a civil servant, in those days, which involved so much travel, gave him many opportunities to pursue, and enlarge, his knowledge of natural history. The notes in his diary give us a chance to see what our world was like 70 years ago.

The very first entry on December 13, 1929 shows what a careful observer he was. "About the bungalow (Sea View, Malabar Hill), I saw House Crows, House Sparrows and Kites (*Milvus govinda=M. migrans*). The Crows and Kites fairly swarm here, and the air rings with their cries. I noted the use the Kite makes of its broad, forked, wedge-shaped tail in flight; change of direction is effected usually by this tail, which in the process is sometimes so twisted as to be almost vertical." Though kites are a common sight all over India, not many I suppose have noted the tail being used as a rudder.

Camping in the PWD bungalow at Vadgaon, Pune district, between December16-24, 1930, he writes: "Up the hill behind the bungalow one evening, we saw a large flock of small birds which settled on some thorn bushes, practically covering them; we had seen such flocks before, and now found that the birds were Yellow Throated Sparrows." These lines call for a comment. First the name of the village Vadgaon obviously named because of the large number of vad or ficus trees which the area contained. How nice it would be if we could still name our new towns or villages on the basis of the large population of native trees, but the real amazement is the presence of such a large flock of yellow throated sparrows, seen over 70 years ago. No such flocks of this beautiful bird has been reported recently and the obvious reason for its decline is the destruction of its food sources by chemicals we now use to keep down insect pests.

Between February 15 and 24 in 1931, while camping at Junnar in Pune district Tom Waterfield wrote: "This camp was in a good mango grove, though the trees were not as fine as those at Bhose…The ground seemed to be covered with Tree Pipits [*Anthus trivialis*] which were very unafraid." On one occasion the bird was almost inside the tent while people were around. The tree pipit is found everywhere in India in winter and its spotted breast and the deliberate manner of walking on the ground makes identification easy. But while I have seen half a dozen of this species sitting on electric wires in Bangalore and elsewhere in India, never have I seen nor are there recent reports of so many.

It is from reports such as these that we realize how much bird life has eroded in the last 70 years. Going through the many pages of this beautifully written diary, one realizes what a wonderful country India was in those days. As a school boy, I remember having visited some of the areas where Tom was posted and which he describes - herds of black buck, the ponds and lakes full of clean pure water, wonderful groves of trees and the masses of birds which one saw.

Tom refers to his morning rides on horseback when he went out with his glasses to see the birds, and simultaneously there is a reference to his evening walks when he went out with a gun after partridge, hare, black buck and many other animals and birds about which he wrote with perception and admiration. It is also clear that the officers of those times, travelling on horseback, were in far closer contact with the land and the people than the officers of today who zoom through the countryside in their jeeps. I think it would be a good idea if all our senior officers in rural India were forced to use the horse and not the jeep as a vehicle. Our administration might then become more effective.

After returning from service, Tom decided to settle down in Pune and devoted himself to bringing up his "adopted" Maharashtrian daughters. But his interest in natural history, in birds and butterflies in particular, never faded. He wrote 26 articles for the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* between 1966 and 1995. I particularly liked his piece on the birds of Nasrapur, which was published in October 1970. I reproduce parts of it here. "Feeling the need to 'escape' for a couple of days, I fled to the Spiritual Life Centre at Nasrapur, 22 miles south of Pune on NH 4. And on this mid-September visit I discovered, as I had somehow failed to do on earlier occasions, an extra magic arising from the Centre's abundant bird life. The room assigned to me was in an isolated cottage backed by a garden with high ficus and gulmohar trees; in front, a strip of mixed teak forest lay between me and the Manganga stream; while to my right the forest stretched away to open plough-land with deep-grassed meadows beyond. And beyond these were terraced rice fields, more grassy meadows, and the standing millet crops of Nasrapur village.

"A short stroll on the evening of my arrival provided a list of 16 different species. Every second tree, it seemed, gave forth the snoring of Spotted Doves. Within the span of five minutes I watched, from close at hand, a flock of Small Minivets, a Rufous Turtle-Dove, and an incredible energetic Mahratta Woodpecker (female) rushing about the trunk and branches of a babool. Soon after, I watched cock Weaver birds in all their yellow glory swoop down upon the heads of millet, and picked out a Painted Partridge hunting over a bare field on the further slope of a narrow valley. As I approached a stream in the fading light, a Green Sandpiper was bobbing along the water's margin below a steep bank, and a Blue Flycatcher flew up from somewhere and vanished in a thorn-bush.

"Till late at night I could hear the *pi-piyaha* of a Brain-fever Bird mingling with the low water noises and the whisper of the forest breeze.

"…At twilight on the next day, I managed to stand still enough to watch one Fantail Flycatcher bathing in a tiny pool scarcely six feet away. I was less pleased to find the woods full of Crow-Pheasants, of whom a poet is at this very moment writing.

"*Never more murd'rous throat*
Gave forth a richer note.

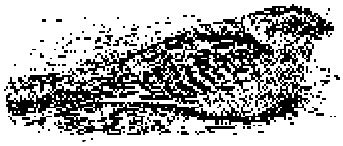
"A pair of these birds were building their bulky nest in the flowery crown of a teak tree below my cottage. (These birds) approached the place in the most carefree fashion, with none of the elaborate and silent stealth, which I have hitherto observed in all coucals' approach to the nest. On one occasion, one bird even emitted a hoot as it alighted upon the twiggy mass. During my morning walk, I chanced upon five Crow-Pheasants close enough to each other to suggest a single gang.

"From one side came the fluting of an Oriole, from the opposite direction the caw of a Jungle Crow and the *tonk* of Coppersmith, while a well-known song of great vigour drew my eyes to a Tailor Bird almost in front of me.

"Up in the grasslands I heard the clear calling of a Painted Partridge from a hundred yards away, and eventually made out the caller as he sat, confident and careless, on the branch of a leafless bombax. Walking across a reaped field, I sent a little covey of Quail scuttling before me. A little while later, I had to tell myself firmly 'There is no such bird as a pale-green Paradise Flycatcher', and soon my glasses solved the mystery: A Spotted Munia flying along the hedge with a long grass-blade trailing and waving behind it.

"I watched five Roseringed Parakeets fluttering and screaming round the bare top of a dying jambul tree, and was just in time to see a Crow-Pheasant seize and fly away with a fairly large lizard. I was detained for a while trying to spot a pair of loras on a tree under which I passed (surely these are among the very hardest of all birds to pick out from the thick green foliage in which they love to spend their time). But the loveliest sight of the whole walk was a Grey Wagtail tripping along the bank of a stream, twisting this way and that, leaping into the air, and seeming almost to ask the whole world whether it had ever seen a more gorgeous primrose waistcoat. I thought, as the sight of any Wagtail always makes me think, that in all the tribe of birds there is no more faultlessly graceful creature than this."

(Reprinted from Indian Nature Diaries Column of Deccan Herald, dated 12 October 2003.)



The Death of a Nightjar

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Returning from a tiring mornings' worth of bird watching, we stopped under a roadside tree to freshen-up. As I swung the vehicle off the road, I spotted a crumpled shape on the ground, amidst the dry leaves and stones, below the overhanging branches of a Peepal. My first reaction was that it was a babbler, until I went up to it and realised with a sharp intake of breath that the life-less bundle of feathers was a nightjar. Knocked aside by a speeding vehicle, I thought, as I crouched for a better look. The eyes that held night within their luminous vaults, had been taken by ants. Its soft plumage, however, spoke of a relationship with an earth we are rapidly losing sight of—burnt browns and greys that intermingled seamlessly with brittle, fallen leaves scattered over dry grit-strewn ground; rufous of deepening shadows reflecting a crepuscular firmament; spots of brilliant white mingling with the light that connects curving horizons and all life across this planet—horizons no longer visible to us, in our myopic obsession with the immediate, and the artificial.

Like most predictable humans we were interested in naming it—which species? We cannot seem to connect with our surroundings

unless we reduce everything into logical, identifiable slots that fit our educated world-view. Which is fine to a point. But we tend to stop with that clinical analysis, as though that were an end in itself, not looking beyond, at the inter-connectedness of all life. We treat fellow earthlings with foolish disdain, either ignoring their role in the existence of life on earth or unable to comprehend its mysterious complexity. We walk the earth with arrogance, yet are unable to control the results of our own actions.

We counted tail feathers, spreading them fanwise. Stretched wings. Enumerated primaries. Pushed open its pliant bill to reveal the cavernous gape and marveled at the rim of stiff bug-snaring bristles around it. The inquisitive are oblivious to dignity whether in the living or the dead. Later, in trying to prepare a museum skin we realised the cause of death. It had been shot. A neat hole punctured its lungs. Why would someone want to shoot a nightjar? It was not an item for the table nor was it good sport. But there are people out there, who'll shoot at anything that moves, just for kicks.

A voice had been stilled, that once "*chuk-chuk-chukkurrr*ed" in the gloaming, keeping the faith of an earth that was winding down its operations for the day. A life snuffed out that did not interfere with our lifestyle yet became a victim of our senselessness. Had the nightjar lived, it would have flown up into the darkening sky, swallowing innumerable mosquitoes as it patrolled its territory, oblivious of the fact that it was 'helping' mankind in their battle against the mosquito. But animals have no foresight, nor do they mull over their actions. Unfortunately, neither do most of us.

Boobies in India

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Boobies belong to order *Pelecaniformes*. They are full-webbed swimmers and collect food by plunge diving. Remain close to shore and breed on offshore islands. Boobies belong to *Sulidae* family and *Sula* genera.

So far, as the Indian subcontinent is concerned three species of Boobies the masked booby (*Sula dactylatra*) the red footed booby (*Sula sula*) and the brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*) are recorded. There are possibilities that they breed on Lakshadweep islands and the Maldives. But these records are individual records. There are no references regarding details and regular sightings of boobiles on the subcontinent. Recently (3rd July 2003) a live but sick bird (it was not able to fly), of the fourth race, the blue footed booby *Sula nebouxii* was found by Chirag Kotadiya, Bhavesh Bladhiya, Bharat Solanki and Sandip Vaghela, members of the Flamingo Nature Club, Mahuva, on the rocks of Pingaleshwar beach near Mahuva* town of Bhavnagar district. (Gujarat). It died next day but its body has been sent to BNHS, Mumbai where it has been preserved in the specimen collection department.

The blue footed booby (*Sula nebouxii*) is a Pacific Coast species, breeding on islands of Mexico, Ecuador and northern Peru and the Galapagos Islands. It has occurred twice in the interior of Texas, which may have been associated with tropical storms (driving the birds well inland) or human intervention (boobies are exceptionally tame compared to other birds). The blue-footed booby (76-84 cm) is a medium sized bird with clear blue feet, pale brown head, scaly brown and white back, brown lower rump and tail. The underparts whitish with brown tail and upperwings a uniform dark brown. The underwing is brown with a white patch at base. Immature have dull gray feet, darker head and chest. The possibilities are that either this bird got caught in a storm because of the recent unusual weather patterns and got lost and reached Mahuva or that it was an escape from a collection in a zoo either in India or one of the gulf countries.

There are many reports on the effects of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon on birds. All these reports note that changes and storms created by ENSO have affected the blue – footed booby *S.nebouxii.* It has been noted that the effect of ENSO and sea temperatures on primary productivity changes in the distribution of many fish species result in an increased mortality and reduced nesting success in many pelagic birds. Changes in ocean ecosystems also appear to modify dispersal patterns and cause the appearance of species in new locations. The effect was particularly notable in the colonies of blue-footed booby (*Sula nebouxii*) in the Galapagos islands failed and breeding colonies were deserted after SSTs warmed in January 1987 during an ENSO event, while masked booby *S. dactylatra* and red footed booby *S. sula* were either unaffected or simply delayed breeding for several months. The failure of *S.nebouxii* to raise young was associated with the reduced availability of their main prey item, which apparently differs from that of *S.sula* and *S.dactylatra.* Massive mortality among the *S. nebouxii* along the northern side of the Gulf of Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1997 was reported and many pairs failed to raise young in the area.

It is possible that some such changes of environment or some storms in their breeding grounds or feeding areas forced our bird to travel as far as the coast of Gulf of Khambhat in the Arabian Sea.

We acknowledge our thanks to Mr. Zafar-ul Islam, Project Manager, IBA-IBCN(BNHS), Mumbai for the authentication of identification of the bird and Mr. Sunil Bhavsar, USA for providing us details.

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**Mahuva is Situated on coast of Gulf of Khambhat, Eastern Saurashtra region of Gujarat (021°.05'North, 071°.45'East) 300km South from Ahmedabad.*

REVIEWS

BIRDS OF WESTERN GHATS, KOKAN AND MALABAR (INCLUDING BIRDS OF GOA). *By SATISH PANDE, SALEEL TAMBE, CLEMENT FRANCIS M. and NIRANJAN SANT (2003). A book by Ela Foundation. Published by Bombay Natural History Society/Oxford University Press. Pp. 374+18+1 map. Hardbound. Price: Rs.995/-(ISBN 019 566878 2). Reviewed by* ***V. SANTHARAM*** *RISHI VALLEY EDUCATION CENTER, RISHI VALLEY P.O. 517352, CHITTOOR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH.*

This book was officially released on 13th November 2003 at the IIT Powai, Mumbai in the inaugural session of the Centenary Seminar of the Journal of Bombay Natural History Society titled "A Look at Threatened Species", by Mr. T.J. Roberts (author of *The Birds of Pakistan*).

With a captivating close-up photograph of the endemic Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata* on the front cover and equally attractive flight pictures of the Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* on the rear cover, one cannot resist the temptation of laying hands on this lovely book. With over 1700 colour photographs covering 580 species that occur in this global hotspot of our country, this must rank as one of the most lavishly illustrated bird books in India. The authors, all amateurs following their own professions, have done a marvelous and stupendous job of getting together some rare and beautiful photographs taken from the collections of over 150 photographers, both international as well national, besides supplementing the photographs with illustrations taken from several books such as *A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of Indian subcontinent* (Ali & Ripley, 1989), *Book of Indian Birds* (Ali, 1989), *Birds of the Indian subcontinent* (Grimmett, et al., 1998), etc. There are also illustrations of feathers, postal stamps, coins and paper currencies depicting birds.

The main section of the book (pp. 1-328) deals with species accounts. Several symbols and abbreviations concerning habit (aerial, arboreal, terrestrial, aquatic/semi aquatic), habitat (including elevations), food, flight pattern, nest type, time (whether crepuscular or nocturnal) and social organization (seen single, in pairs or flocks), head each page where one species is dealt in detail. The information is organized as follows: English name (follows Manakadan & Pittie, 2001), alternate English names (if any), Family, Scientific name and *Synopsis* (Ripley, 1982) number, Sanskrit and Marathi name(s), Size in mm, Sexual Dimorphism, Residential status, Description, Distribution in the region, Nest-site, nesting season, Materials used for nesting, Parental care, Call, Ecological notes, Cultural notes, Status and related species. Besides, each page has been profusely illustrated in colour depicting birds in photographs, paintings, stamps, coins, etc. Illustrations include feathers, nests, eggs, conservation, rehabilitation/rescue efforts, habitats, related species (prey species, co-habitants, etc). Wherever possible, plumage variations in the species, including albinism, have also been depicted. Photographs of juveniles/young birds are included. Notes and photos on related species include species found outside the geographical scope of the book. A few other tidbits, like partridge trapping, notes on immature kingfishers, risks faced by young storks falling off their nests and remedial action to be taken, to name a few are also included. The pages are packed with illustrations and each page on an average has 3-4 photographs, at times even twice as much! There are quite a few pages in between with only photographs and captions.

Besides the main text, there are the following articles by individual authors: Geography of the region by Sanjeev B. Nalavade (pp.329), Avian geography of the Western Ghats by Sanjeev B. Nalavade & Satish Pande (pp.331), Vegetation of the Western Ghats by S.D. Mahajan (pp. 333), Wonderful birds by Satish Pande (pp. 337), Bird behaviour by Anil Mahabal (pp. 341), Important Bird Areas (IBA) Programme by Asad R. Rahmani (pp. 343), Indian ethno-ornithological perspective by Suruchi Pande (pp. 344), A brief history of Indian Ornithology by Satish Pande (pp. 347) and Bird remains from Indian archaeological contexts: a bird's eye view by Pramod P. Joglekar (pp. 349). The Foreword is written by J.C. Daniel, Hon. Secretary, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), the Preface by Satish Pande, A brief introduction to the book titled ' About the Book' and 'Geographical Scope of the Book', Quick Index to Contents, a list of threatened birds of India (p. 353), a glossary (p. 355), indices of English (p. 356), scientific (p. 360), Sanskrit (p. 364) and Marathi names (p. 367) of birds, four lithographs from archives of BNHS, a map depicting the area covered by the book and acknowledgements and credits complete the contents of the book.

As the author states in the preface, "this book intends to document, with unique photographs, the current status of rich bird life of an Indian Hotspot of global importance—the Western Ghats, including Kokan and Malabar". It is also stated on the back cover that information in the book is updated till 2003. Elsewhere it is stated that the book includes "several new geographical distribution records for our region".

The choice of the rather uncommon spelling "Kokan" for 'Konkan' throughout the book was somewhat baffling. Perhaps this is an accepted version in parts of Maharashtra but it is likely be new to others. I was never aware of this version although I am a Konkani speaker myself!

I must admit I was fascinated by the choice of photographs, many of which are of high standard. Particularly there are some very good ones both from the scientific viewpoint as well as from the photographic angle. In the first category, some of the examples that could be cited are: p. 27—Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* with a Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* in its beak, p. 34—mating of Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor*, p. 45—Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni*, p. 42—Spot-billed Ducks mating, p. 236—juvenile Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* near a decapitated Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, p. 237—larder of the Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*, p. 245—White-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx major* at nest, p. 263—Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata* in a giant woodspider's *Nephila maculata* web, p. 161—female (Purple-rumped) sunbird (Nectariniidae) feeding a Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus* chick, p. 284—Black-lored Yellow Tit *Parus xanthogenys* and (Oriental) Magpie-Robin at pipe hole, p. 292—Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja* nesting on a bulb-holder, p. 281—Asian Paradise-Flycatcher male in brown plumage at nest, etc. In the latter category, p. 1—Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* and Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* at nest, p. 14—Large Egret *Casmerodius albus* showing off their aigrettes, p. 61—Shikra *Accipiter badius*, p. 74—Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, p. 86, 87—Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii*, p. 140—Bridled Terns *Sterna anaethetus* during courtship, p. 165—

Oriental Bay-Owl *Phodilus badius*, p. 198—Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*, p. 214—Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*, p. 226—Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus*, p. 244—Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*, p. 275—Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*, p. 322—Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*, p. 324—Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*.

While the printer has done justice to the photographs, it is a shame that the real quality of the pictures does not show up well in the present small size format. An example is the cover photo itself, which when depicted in the standard size (p. 275), does not look as impressive as it does on the cover. Perhaps the editors could have avoided a few photographs and given more prominence to the more interesting ones. I personally felt that quite a few photographs pertaining to species not found or not likely to be seen on the Western Ghats could have been eased out to highlight the species of this region. I shall return to this point a little later. Quite a few photographs in the book are taken at nest and though these are important records I only hope the photographers kept the interest of the birds in mind while taking these pictures. Invariably some of the photographs in a collection of this magnitude are likely to turn out to be of poor quality and are taken in captive/studio conditions but are nevertheless of great value from the scientific viewpoint. These should not detract us from the real worth of this work. In particular, I was impressed by the efforts made to depict rare and shy birds that are even difficult to see in the field such as the rails and crakes (Rallidae, pp. 94, 95), Violet Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus* (p. 162), White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis pallipes* (pp. 276, 277), Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon *Treron bicincta* (p. 149), to name a few. I am particularly happy that juveniles/young birds have been included. I remember how difficult it had been for me to identify the chicks of the Lesser Whistling-Ducks *Dendrocygna javanica* that were found in a house in Thrissur, Kerala a decade or so back. Salim Ali's and other standard books of those days had no description of the chicks and finally it was with the aid of Baker & Inglis (1930) [or was it a *Fauna* volume of Baker's (1922-31)? I forget which one now] that the mystery was solved. Photographic documentation, as attempted in this work, could ease the problems to a great deal.

Again it is not fair to point out errors in the captions in a few cases as it is understandable that slips of this nature are bound to creep in a book of this magnitude. Yet I would like to point out a few that I noticed (perhaps there could be a few more) for the benefit of the readers and authors to enable corrections in a later edition.

Page 219: Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* and Nilgiri Pipit *Anthus nilghiriensis* picture captions are perhaps interchanged. Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* (bottom right) looks more like a Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* (photo not too clear).

Page 246: Oriental Magpie-Robins attending to the Chick—they seem to be Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis* (notice the eye-brow).

Page: 216: Top right Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (1st winter)—is it not a Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*?

I would like to point out another matter relating to the photographs. Some of them are not on the same page as their relevant text (eg p. 274 has a picture of the Grey-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus priocephalus* when you least expect it—amongst Flycatchers (Muscicapidae) whereas the main text appears on and index reference is to p. 230). Cross-indexing would have made reference easier.

Coming to the text, the Main Text covers 236 species for which details in the format stated earlier are given. Most of the details provided in this section are adequate and helpful in identification of the species and understanding their biology. However, in the case of other related species described, only brief information, restricted to two to four sentences, is provided. The information given for these additional species is very limited and not uniform in nature. In some cases only identification features and residential status are given (eg. p. 218—Richard's Pipit) while in some others it is just the range (p. 218—Brown Rock or Long-billed Pipit). This has resulted in inadequate descriptions for certain difficult groups of birds (p. 265—warblers (Sylviinae), p. 218—Pipits (Motacillidae). The exclusion of calls for some of these, especially warblers, is bound to result in confusion for beginners who use this book. Again some of the additional species do not have adequate information on their status or distribution within the region [eg. P. 157: Cuckoos (Cuculidae)]. Besides, inclusion of related species from outside the range limits of this book or even from Sri Lanka or northeast India without sufficient details could lead to a lot of confusion and it would not be surprising if "new records" of such species come in from inexperienced birdwatchers.

The criteria for choice of species for detailed description are not clear. While one would have expected all the endemics and near-threatened species to get the priority in this, it was a little disappointing to find several birds of this category being treated briefly though they are illustrated with pictures (eg., Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon, Nilgiri Pipit, Grey-headed Bulbul, White-bellied Shortwing, Nilgiri *Garrulax cachinnans* and Grey-breasted Laughingthrushes *Garrulax jerdoni*, Nilgiri Flycatcher, White-bellied Treepie *Dendrocitta leucogastra* Jerdon's Baza, Lesser Adjutant-Stork *Leptoptilos javanicus*). Since this book is about birds of a "global hotspot", one would have liked more emphasis on the endemic and endangered species highlighted. Also one would like to see more prominence given to races that are easily distinguishable, confined mainly to this region and species that occur only in the Western Ghats region in Peninsular India (e.g., White-headed subspecies *Sturnus malabaricus blythii* of Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*, Crimson-throated Barbet *Megalaima rubricapillus*, Oriental Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus orientalis*, Great-Eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis*).

Though it is stated "the records have been updated to 2003 and cross checked with records and lists in various authentic publications…" (*About The Book*), I have my doubts if this is entirely correct. I could cite a few instances of lapses—

Page 165—Oriental Bay-Owl—refers to records in Anaimalai and Nelliampathy hills. But there is no mention of more recent sightings in Kalakkad Mundanturai (way down at the southern tip of the Ghats) and at Cannanore Town (Shankar Raman, *Forktail* 17, 2001). There are a few more sightings of this bird from Thattekad and elsewhere.

Page 173—Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus monileger*—refers to records from Goa, Top Slip, Amboli and Radhanagari Range, and near Belgaum. This species is recorded widely from several sites in southern Western Ghats notably in Kerala.

Page 223—Ashy Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus*—only site mentioned is Karnala. Whereas, I know of at least three recent records of this species in this region—Periyar Tiger Reserve [Robertson *JBNHS* 88(3): 455-456]; Trivandrum [Sushanth Kumar *NLBW* 35(3): 49; Goregaon, Mumbai [Paralkar *NLBW* 35(4): 73].

The status given for some species appears to pertain to the northern Western Ghats rather than to the entire region and is somewhat misleading. Examples are:

Page 202: several woodpecker (Picidae) species.

Page 250: Rusty-tailed flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*—"Vagrant to our area".

Page 150: Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*—"Rare".

Page 187: Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*—"Rare".

Page 323: Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*—"Rare".

Page 223: Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*—"Uncommon".

Page 224: Pied Flycatcher-Shrike *Hemipus picatus*—"Occasional".

Page 240: Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*—"Uncommon".

Page 278: Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*—"Uncommon".

Page 283: Great Tit *Parus major*—"Occasional".

Page 293: Small Sunbird *Nectarinia minima*—"Uncommon".

Page 299: Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*—"Uncommon".

Page 315: Southern Hill-Myna *Gracula indica*—"Rare".

Page 321: Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*—" Uncommon".

Page 206: Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*—"Occasional".

Page 209: Rufous-tailed Finch-Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus*—" Common".

It is good to know that the Small Green Bee-eaters are "Abundant" in Western Ghats (at least in the Northern parts) as in my experience their numbers are declining in other areas especially along the southeastern coastal regions.

Some of the other details mentioned in the text are somewhat misleading or are not entirely correct.

Page: 105: Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*—"may be mistaken for the Pacific Golden Plover Pluvialis fulva.."

Page: 205: Great Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis*—"the first bird to abandon the area when forest felling activities begin… Indicators of undisturbed forests". (My own survey in 1995-96, paper presented in PASOC 1996 and *Forktail* 19, 2003 do not entirely support this statement).

Page 195: Great Pied Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*—"Nest entrance is plastered with a cement of females (sic) dung, figs, leaves, sticks and wet mud brought by the male..". However, recent studies by Kannan and James [1997; *JBNHS* 94(3): 454-5] failed to confirm this and they found entrance was sealed exclusively by excreta and fig seeds it contained.

The book includes several "new records" of range extensions "based on direct observations of the authors, confirmed sightings by reliable local birdwatchers and extensive survey of ornithological literature". Examples are: Little Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula westermanni* near Pune, Golden-headed Fantail-Warbler or Bright-headed Cisticola *Cisticola exilis* also near Pune, Ortolon Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* at Saswad near Pune and at Nashik, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum* (vagrant), Ultramarine or Whitebrowed Blue flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*, Indian Chat or Indian Chat *Cercomela fusca* (Saswad near Pune), Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus* (Burnt Island, Konkan). These are useful additions to our existing knowledge. However it may be better to get these range extensions recorded in the *JBNHS* or other journals to add to their credibility.

Apart from these records, several nuggets of new and first-hand information is presented throughout the text pages, like: fresh droppings of Bar-headed geese *Anser indicus* are green in colour since they eat tender shoots (p. 36); Redrumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* accepting nest on a temple roof that was painted (p. 213); specialization in individual Southern Grey Shrikes in prey items (p. 235); old nests of Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* used by Oriental Magpie-Robins *Copsychus saularis* (p. 243); Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* evicting chicks of another pair and using their nest box and nesting in sodium vapour lamps, using plastics as nest materials; nest of Dusky Crag Martin *Hirundo concolor* parasitized by long-tailed tree mouse (p. 211); replacement and acceptance by parent birds of a stolen chick of the Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus* (p. 70); incubation period of White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (p. 50).

Another minor criticism is the inconsistent usage of names. Although the book follows the "Standardised Common Names" suggested by Manakadan & Pittie (2001), in a few cases, the names adopted are in variation from this. In some case, the suggested names are provided as alternative English names. A few examples are: Oriental Dollarbird instead of Oriental Broad-billed Roller, Yellowbacked Sunbird instead of Crimson Sunbird, Indian Brown Rock Chat instead of Indian Chat and Indian Skylark instead of Eastern Skylark. Perhaps it is too early for us to get adjusted to the new nomenclature and slips of this nature are inevitable.

Throughout the book the authors refer to relocating, rescuing and rehabilitating young/injured birds (pp. 20, 28, 17, 34, 188, 290-91, etc.) and it would have been useful if some of these details were compiled together and written as a comprehensive chapter on how to handle sick, injured birds.

The section "Cultural Notes" is interesting and serves the purpose stated in the introductory pages namely, " (to) bring the birds closer to our hearts by linking the avian life to our culture and heritage". Particularly interesting are the explanations to the Sanskrit names and other details such as references to the beak of Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa* and invention of the long surgical tong by Sushrut *c.* AD 400 (p. 29); references to Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus* and the Taittiriya Upanishad (p. 81); Iranian legend connected with Rosy Starling *Sturnus roseus* (p. 311), etc. However one also needs to exercise some caution in accepting these statements *in toto*. I shall cite some examples:

Page 195: tribals in Kokan often tying "the lofty hornbill *Buceros bicornis* beak to their heads while hunting, as a method of camouflage" (emphasis mine).

Page 109: Reference to the Sociable Lapwing's *Vanellus gregarius* calls in the ancient text Matsyapuran. How are we to know if this was indeed the bird referred to by these notes? A certain amount of poetic liberties exercised by the authors of these ancient texts may not be acceptable as reliable natural history observations today.

One thing that clearly comes through as one goes through the text of this book is the feel of the authors for birds and in their welfare and conservation. Sample these passages: " the multisyllabic, enthusiastic song is very refreshing, especially when heard in the arid landscape where the bird dwells!" (p. 298), "the sonorous whistle has a hypnotic effect…the melodious song, with much tonal variation, once heard in the picturesque settings in which the thrush dwells, cannot be forgotten" (p. 240), "the act of nest building is a treat to the eyes" (p. 213). It also shows how much of fieldwork has been done by the contributors.

There are a few printing errors but none too glaring and one feels there could have been better editing of the text in some parts. Overall the work is quite inspiring and the visual impact of the book is simply stunning as it is printed fully in colour and in art paper. One only wishes the text was given more attention especially in the areas of distribution, current status, etc. The authors have referred to this work as "a truly international collaboration". Perhaps a more concerted effort at gathering information on a regional level, from other birdwatchers from the southern parts of the Western Ghats, where many of the endemics occur, would have made this work more authentic and authoritative. A comprehensive bibliography or a section citing References/sources of Information used would have added considerably to the value of the book and helped researchers or those interested to access the original source material used in the book.

Though the price tag of Rs. 995/- sounds a little high for a common person in India (I myself haven't purchased a personal copy yet!), the authors and publishers have tried their best in keeping the price at a no-profit level and several people have contributed financially to cut down the costs. We must be grateful to all of them for this.

Despite all the shortcomings pointed out this is a really a fantastic book and is highly recommended for those interested in birds and in their welfare. I hope this book will inspire many of our youth to take more readily to the outdoors to study birds and pursue their interests in understanding and conserving the rich natural heritage of this truly magnificent biodiversity hotspot.

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BIOLOGY OF INDIAN BARBETS. *By H.S.A. YAHYA (2001). Authorspress, New Delhi, Amsterdam. Hardback, 14.5cm x 22cm (Illustrated cover & dust cover, the latter with a portrait of the author & Salim Ali), pp. i-xxvi, 1-170, 1 plate (colour, by; Carl D'Silva), 2 photographs (colour, by; Rishad Naoroji, S. Sridhar), 2 photographs (black & white), 1 line drawing, 2 maps, 8 text-figures, 37 tables. Cover price Rs. 450/-. Reviewed by* ***AASHEESH PITTIE****, 8-2-545 Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034., E-mail: aasheesh@vsnl.in*

Contents: Half-title (p. i); title (p. iii); imprint (p. iv); dedication (p. v); Foreword (p. vii, by; J.C. Daniel); Prologue [p. ix, by; Prof. (Late) R.M. Naik]; Acknowledgements (pp. xi-xii); A comprehensive summary (pp. xiii-xviii); List of tables (p. xix-xxi); List of figures (p. xxiii); Contents (p. xxv-xxvi); Introduction (pp. 1-18); Study area (pp. 19-30); Status, distribution and general habits (pp. 31-60); Food and feeding behaviour (pp. 61-88); Breeding biology (pp. 89-144); Appendix-I (pp. 145-148; List of some common plants identified in the Periyar Tiger Reserve); Appendix-II (pp. 149-150; List of mammals observed in Periyar Tiger Reserve); Appendix-III (pp. 151-156; List of species of birds identified in the Periyar Tiger Reserve); Appendix-IV (pp. 157-158; Orders and Families of insects identified at Thekkady Periyar Tiger Reserve); Bibliography (pp. 159-166); Index (pp. 167-170).

Each chapter contains the following sub-sections: Introduction (taxonomic affinities and distribution of barbets, physical characteristics of barbets, method and materials); Study area (habitat preference of birds, intensive study area); Status, distribution and general habits (general habits, calling behaviour, significance of calls and vocal displays, voice versus vision, roosting behaviour, roosting pattern, preening behaviour, drinking & bathing behaviour); Food and feeding behaviour (fruiting season & abundance of fruit trees, food preference, formation of mixed hunting parties, competition for food & coexistence, impact of feeding on coffee); Breeding biology (method of study, method of opening the nest-hole, breeding season, courtship and pair formation, nest-site selection, nest defence behaviour, nest excavation and excavation period, egg laying, clutch size and incubation, nest feeding and nestling period, nest sanitation, growth rate, fledging and fledgling period, breeding success). Appendix-III contains a list of 161 species of birds seen in Periyar Tiger Reserve.

This is a general review of the barbets found in India (Capitonidae: *Megalaima* spp.), and an in-depth study of the two taxa *Megalaima viridis* and *M. rubricapilla malabarica* found in Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala, India. It is a welcome addition to our ornithological literature as it deals with members of a single family of birds. There are very few such monographs from the Indian region. The only one that comes to mind immediately is Sudhin Sengupta's (1982) *The Common Myna*.

Barbets are so widespread throughout India, and their gaudy colours and loud calls so attractive, that no birdwatcher misses seeing them. Though this book focuses on the biology and ecology of two species from the southwest of India, several

observations of the author are common for the family, making this work a useful reference for birdwatchers across the country. I will give you an example. Every winter, the Coppersmith Barbets *Megalaima haemacephala* of my compound, behave in a strange and gregarious manner. I know from observations that they are not social birds and that they lead rather solitary single or paired lives. But in winter, I have seen them, early in the morning, perched quietly in a group of 8 to 15 individuals! This is not an unusual and chance aggregation either. They perch rather close to each other and move from perch to perch as a small flock. Frequently, they preen, not just themselves, but each other too. Their aggressive nature however, is quite apparent from the frequent altercations that members of the group have with each other. I could never place this behaviour until I read in Prof. Yahya's book, "During the colder months of the year *viridis*, *rubricapilla* and *haemacephala* were often found preening in groups of five to eight birds. Usually in the morning hours they were found perched on different branches of tall trees and preening. For this, exposed branches are generally selected. It is presumed, one intention behind this posture and preening would be for sunning also. At times the birds would go sunning, preening, and calling for long periods…Among *viridis* during this period the author often observed a chase for the same perch, while *rubricapilla* were found to be comparatively peaceful," (pp. 57-58).

I can only recommend this book to everyone, as it takes us a little deeper into the lives of species, that we generally tend to notice and mark on our lists simply as 'seen'.

CORRESPONDENCE

A PARADISE FOR WHTTE–BELLIED SEA EAGLE: NETRANI ISLAND, N. A. MADHYASTHA, Inchara, Srinivas Nagar, Chitpadi, Udupi 576 101 E Mail: n_a madhyastha@yahoo.com

Off the coast of Bhatkal (13° 58' N, 74° 32'E) in the Uttara Kannada district of Kamataka, there is an interesting, small and beautiful Island in the Arabian Sea called Netrani (14° 1' N, 74° 19' E). It looks like a piece of Western Ghat floating in the Sea. A flat topped wooded island stands at 101 metres above the sea. It takes about three hours to reach this isolated island by a Persian boat form Honnavar (14° 19' N, 74° 24' E), a famous fishing harbour of Kamataka. The Netrani Island is rocky all around with huge boulders on the shore and hence practically there is no safe place to land on the island. If the sea is rough, one just cannot reach the island at all. The western side of the island is very steep and vertical, while the eastern side is much safer to reach to the top of the island. However, the fine, dry, glossy and slippery grass makes the climbing difficult even on the eastern side. The top of the island is full of vegetation: climbers, lianas, trees, shrubs, and grasslands with the elements of Western Ghats, such as *Ficus bengalensis, and Saraca asoka.* One gets a feeling of being inside the Western Ghats when reaches the top of the island.

What is most surprising of the island is a colony of whitebellied sea eagle, *Haliseetus leucogaster.* When we went to the island during last January, we could see about a hundred nests on the tall trees such as ficus. It was a thrilling experience to see these magnificiant birds hovering over the island and landing on their nests. Perhaps there is no other known congregation of these birds along our coast.

The white-bellied sea eagle breeds from October to January. Large platform nests of twigs and sticks are built on trees, generally in isolation. I have been watching a nest of this bird on a tall *Alstonia scholar is* for over 15 years near Udupi (Kamataka). The same nest is being used year after year and almost every year a pair of chicks take off, surprisingly not adding any new individuals to local population!

The white-bellied sea eagle is an endangered bird and comes under the first Schedule of Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. Their number is fast declining and their sightings on the shore are becoming rare. The Netrani Island is therefore a heaven for these magnificent birds for two obvious reasons, first-the island is safe from human activities except for occasional visits by the fisherman to worship their respective gods by Hindus, Muslims and Christians, and the second-plenty of food and nesting sites. As the breeding biology of these birds is hardly known the Netrani Island offers a good site for intense study of these birds.

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CRESTED HAWK EAGLE (SPIZAETUS CIRRHATUS) FORAGING ON JUNGLE CAT (FELIS CHAUS). RAJU KASAMBE, Wildlife and Environment Conservation Society, M. R. Colony, MIDC Byepass, Amaravati - 444606, M.S.

Let me first clarify that this event was narrated to me by Mr. Abdul Rafeeque who is the driver of the mini-bus of Melghat Tiger Reserve (MTR) in Amravati District of Maharashtra. He takes tourists through the tourist zone twice daily on a Safari. He is an employee of MTR for the last several years.

On 5th June 2002 early in the morning Rafeeque was taking some 30 odd tourists through the tourist zone. After showing a herd of Gaurs, a Barking deer and a few wild boars they proceed towards Chamar Udhada waterhole. Approximately 1 km ahead of Chamar Udhada there was a nest of a Crested Hawk Eagle *(Spizaetus cirrhatus)* with two chicks on a Haldu tree. I had also seen this nest with the chicks on two earlier occasions, with Rafeequebhai. Everyday he used to show the eagle's nest to the tourists. But on that particular day the eagle could not be sighted. He looked aroud with his experienced eyes for the big raptor. He found the bird sitting on the grassland adjacent to the road just 20 m. away from the bus. He slowly streed the bus to within 5 meters of the eagle, so that everybody could to see the bird form a close range. But the eagle continued to sit at the same spot and did not fly away. Rafeequebhai thought that the bird was injured or trapped in some vines. He got down the bus to examnine and the eagle took to its wings with reluctance. Much to the facination of everyone, the eagle was holding a jungle cat in its powerful claws as it tired to fly. The bird found the jungle cat too heavy to shift to a nearby tree and dropped it midway, to the amazement of the on lookers.

Few tourists and Rafeequebhai approached the prey and found that the cat was still alive but blinded by the killer eagle. Meanwhile the eagle was watching the intruders from a nearby perch.

Rafeequebhai asked the tourists to get back to the bus and reversed the bus to watch the next move of the eagle. Everyone held their breath as the eagle descended and took a stumbling flight with the prey. The prey fell down. The eagle attempted five

more times to carry the prey to its nest, but in vain. Probably the prey was too heavy for the eagle to carry. It gave up its efforts and settled on a perch.

Rafeequebhai had to go ahead and complete his trip. But the event lingered in his mind untill the next day. He decided to examine the spot, when he was taking another batch of tourists on the safari and arrived at the spot where the eagle had dropped its prey. What he found was only bunches of hair of the jungle cat, scattered all around.

Hunting of jungle cat by crested hawk eagle has not been recorded. I would like the readers to note that this nest is there on the same tree for last seven years.

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MASS MORTALITY OF ASIAN OPENBILL-STORK (ANASTOMUS OSCITANS) IN KULIK BIRD SANCTUARY, MALDA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL. S.J. GHOSH, 25/1 R.M.C. Lahiri Street, P.O. Serampore, Hooghly District, West Bengal 712201.

A late monsoon and a heavy, weeklong storm in October 2003 had an extremely disastrous effect on the inhabitants of Kulik Bird Sanctuary, near Raigunj, Malda District, West Bengal. Approximately 4,000 sub-adult birds, most of them Asian Openbill-Storks *Anastomus oscitans* were found dead on the ground, below mixed their heronry.

These storks arrive in large numbers at Kulik, during June-July every year, to nest on Teak *Tectona grandis*, Mango *Mangifera* sp., black plum *Syzygium cuminii*, and Tamarind *Tamarindus indica* trees, spread over an area of a few kilometers, on both banks of Kulik River. Courtship and nesting activities commence in September and fledgelings leave the nest in November. The birds leave in the first week of December.

Kulik Bird Sanctuary seems to be a significant heronry for breeding Asian Openbill-Storks, which share it with species of cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), egrets and herons (Ardeidae), etc. A census conducted by Green Peoples Malda in 2000 resulted in a count of 42,000 birds and in 2001 of 65,388 birds. A majority of these were Asian Openbill-Storks. A high mortality rate existed even in those years, due to seasonal flooding. But never was the number of dead birds so high as in 2003.

In 2003 the storks arrived a few weeks earlier than usual and commenced breeding activities. A devastating storm broke out on 10 October, with heavy downpour. It uprooted several large trees. Many nests were over 40 feet above the ground and their occupants, dislodged due to the storm, died where they fell. The forest department treated injured birds and provided them with fish, earthworms, snails, etc., from the village market. The forest department reconstructed several of the destroyed nests. But these are only temporary stopgap measures. The proper thing to do would be to try and regulate the flood situation in the sanctuary.

RED-NECKED GREBE (PODICEPS GRISEIGENA) IN WEST BENGAL, A CORRECTION. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Netaji Subhash Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda 732101. E-mail: ecoeng@rediffmail.com.

The sighting of Red-necked Grebes *Podiceps griseigena* in Purbashali, Burdwan District, West Bengal, by Mr Prasun Dasgupta [*N.L.B.W.* 43(4): 58.] is not the first record of the species from eastern India, as claimed by him. Several sightings have been published by Choudhury (1996, 2000, 2003), Barua, et al. (1998), Singha (1996) and, Kumar, et al. (2003). It would have been better if the author had given more details of plumage, especially since, in his view, it was a new record for the region.

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A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF PARTICIPATION IN VII NEOTROPICAL ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS. H.S.A. YAHYA, Department of wildlife sciences, A.M.U., Aligarh.

The VII Neotropical Ornithological Congress was held at Puyehue-Osorno, Chile between 5 and 11 October 2003. Since barbets (*Megalaima* spp.) have a pan-tropical distribution, it was quite relevant that my paper entitled "Behavioural ecology of Indian and Neotropical barbets (Capitonidae)" was accepted as an oral presentation. Barbets originated and have spread most widely in Africa. They are well represented in all tropical regions of the world, comprising 33 genera and about 80 species. While 9 species of the genus *Megalaima* occur in India, Neotropical barbets belong to three genera, namely *Capito*, *Eubucco* and *Semnornis*. They are found in different parts of Neotropical regions, largely in central and southern America.

The VII Neotropical Ornithological Congress was a very well organized event where over 500 delegates from 31 countries participated. Most delegates were from the United States, followed by Chile, Argentina and Brazil. I was the only person from India. A Turkish ecologist was another delegate from Asia. Though most papers were presented in Spanish, there was an excellent facility of simultaneous bilingual translation through individual headphones. On each working morning a plenary lecture was delivered. These were very stimulating and informative. Symposia, oral presentations and round table conferences were delivered till late evening. The poster presentations were also of very high quality. A separate two-day workshop was conducted on the Western Hemisphere bird migration problem and prospects. It was useful to witness these deliberations to evolve strategies for monitoring the mass movements of large numbers of migratory

species in this Hemisphere. Some of the presentations were based on long-term study and monitoring and the conclusions thus drawn were quite informative. In India we do not have any such program. In fact content and quality of deliberations in the VII Neotropical Ornithological Congress were far better than the 23rd International Ornithological Congress. Ms Dominique Homeberger, Secretary General of the International Ornithological Congress had the same opinion. It appears that ornithology in South America has advanced quite a lot. Research on basic and applied aspects of avian biology as well as the conservation movement is making good progress. Participation of a large number of young boys and girls in this Congress was a clear indication of the fact that ornithology in Latin America is popular. This is perhaps largely due to recent publications and the founding of the Neotropical Ornithological Society. I wish Indian ornithologists could muster such strength and prosperity. Though we have good potential and background, sincere and coordinated efforts are lacking. Revival of the Ornithological Society of India is a prime need if we wish to develop ornithology in India.

BLACK HEADED BUNTING (EMBERIZA MELANOCEPHALA) AT DAROJI, KARNATAKA. PRAMOD SUBBARAO, #2863, 'Srinrukesari', Officers' Model Colony, S M Road, T – Dasarahalli, Bangalore 560 057. Email: pragsrao@hotmail.com.

Early morning from the balcony I looked at the sky to see huge swarms of birds flying towards east. The mist was clearing just then, the orange sun rising behind a hillock. The flight of birds was ceaseless, lasting for at least an hour, and I was gaping at their huge numbers reminding me of a blanket being flown.

During the last week of December 2003 we visited Daroji Bear Sanctuary, a lesser-known sanctuary for sloth bears in Bellary district of Karnataka. As the vehicle rolled amidst fields of paddies, jowars, cultivations of coconuts plantain, the sight seen earlier during the sunrise was witnessed again. Huge swarms of small birds were pecking at the bunch of jowar from a field; another swarm was picking the grains from the field that was harvested. The birds perched on the wire stretched between poles for miles and were engaged in chattering, actively hopping side ways or on to the nearest green fence. At the first instant, the visitors were mistaken to be Brown Pipits. A male member of the group was closely observed to make our identification flawless. Our group was delighted to see Black headed Buntings in such enormous numbers.

Black headed Bunting (*Emberiza melanocephala*) is a slender sparrow like bird with longer and markedly forked tail. The female has pale yellow coloured body, with slight grayish patches on the wings and on the tail. Male has bright yellow colour with a black head. They are confined to the western side south to Belgaum. The birds arrive from West Asia, East Europe in September/ October and depart again in March/April. But here they arrived in the month of December. Enormous flocks are found near open cultivation of jowar and wheat particularly where the fields are interspersed with scrub jungles.

COMMENTS ON THE COVER PHOTO. Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh, House 219, Sector 16, Chandigarh - 160 015.

The Photograph of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher on the cover (Vol. 43 No. 6) is simply stunning. Incidentally Lt. Col. Tickell's manuscript on birds and mammals of India in 8 volumes illustrated with his own sketches and drawings was sent by him to the RZS in 1854(?).

It is on record in their Minutes Book. The MSS was never published, possibly because about that time the Col. had passed away, rather at a young age. Surely it is time that we got hold of at least a photocopy of Lt. Col. Tickell's manuscript and then have it published in the Newsletter.

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Cover : **Red-vented Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus cafer)* is a perky earth-brown coloured bird, with a slightly tufted black head. It makes charismatic and cheerful "*Be-Quick-Quick*" or "*Be-Care-Ful*" calls. This bulbul also makes "*Peep-a, Peep-a–lo*" and a slower "*Peet-wit-wit-wit-wit*" call. The bulbuls are good allies of our farmers for they demolish ample varieties of agricultural pests. As omnivores they have struck an eternal partnership with the plant kingdom as their official pollination and seed dispersal agents.

Photo: S. Shreyas

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Printed and Published bi-monthly by S. Sridhar at Navbharath Enterprises, Seshadripuram, Bangalore - 560 020, India.

For Private Circulation Only.